

JULIE VERHOEVEN

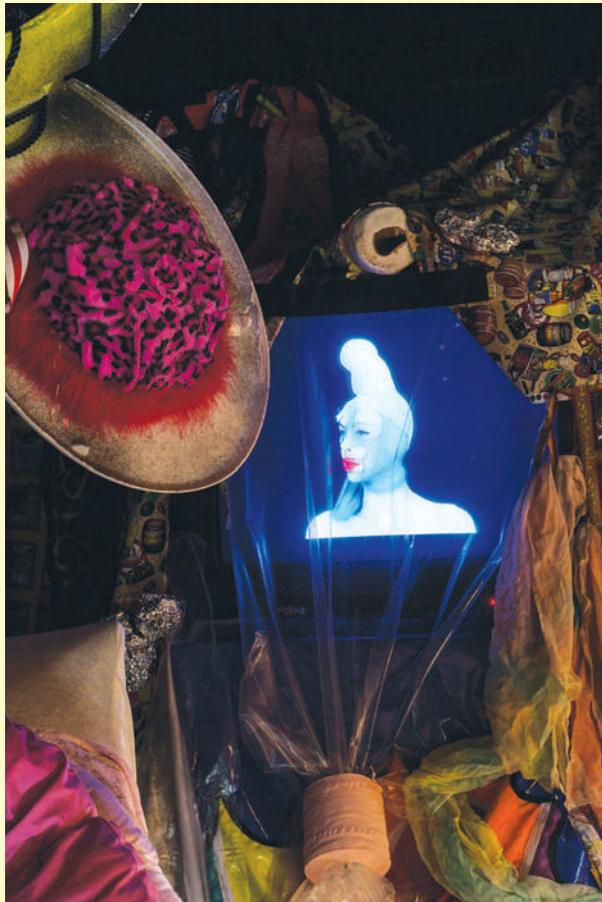
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

Overflowing with breasts and bums, Julie Verhoeven's cheekily titled exhibition, 'Whiskers Between My Legs', transformed the ICA's tiny Fox Reading Room into a carnival of feminine excess interrupted by odd moments of toilet humour. Layers of absurd costumes, garish fabric sculptures and mangled theatre props burst from the gallery walls, creating a rich tapestry that curved up towards the ceiling like a quilted cave. In one corner, a silky, pink, vagina-shaped cushion sprouts rubber gloves and paint brushes from its orifice. From the roof, the sleeves of a dildo-shaped costume hang down to caress a paint-splattered rug. Tiny details emerge from the chaos like witty one-liners: a bejewelled tampon hangs from a messy tangle of cords; a tissue box is disguised as a papier-mâché brick; a soft sculpture of traffic lights boasts nipples; toilet paper rolls hang from every available hook.

Nestled within the clutter are nine small television monitors, each displaying an identical six-minute looped video. The monitors are obscured, either covered with plastic or half-hidden behind decorated toilet seats. This technique emphasizes installation over storyline, but the success of Verhoeven's approach is diminished by the size of the monitors: it is difficult to catch comic details and I don't always get the joke.

The video itself is a bizarre mash-up of three types of imagery: wacky fashion shoots, deadpan feminist performance art and juvenile cartoons. The first consists of Verhoeven's deliberately tacky costumes depicted onscreen, worn by a string of thin white models (including a cameo by London-based art collector, Valeria Napoleone). Some of these costumes mock idealized femininity, such as the fluoro dress with attached prosthetic breasts that droop down to the wearer's waist. Others, like the loo-roll necklace, are pure juvenile fun. However, I was left dumbstruck by a brief and perplexing moment of blackface: footage of a blonde woman, with black face-paint and foam on her chin, staring defiantly at the camera. The image smacks of historical ignorance and, as one offended fan wrote on the ICA's YouTube channel: 'The use of this American aesthetic used to mock and dehumanize black people for entertainment since the advent of chattel slavery is not an aesthetic that you, a white woman, should be indulging in.' A more generous reading, however, would be to interpret this problematic imagery as a dark parody of the fashion industry, where the allure of edginess too often triumphs over cultural sensitivity. (Interestingly, the ICA is currently showing a major solo exhibition by the Dutch photographer Viviane Sassen whose work has caused controversy by blurring the registers of high fashion and documentary-style photography of African and Surinamese subjects.)

More entertaining is the series of absurd performances by a naked woman that seem to parody earnest body-based practices



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from the 1970s. Filmed in close-up, these shots fragment the young woman's body as she performs witty puns such as pulling tissues from a 'box' between her legs. In other clips, Verhoeven mocks erotic self-expression, wearing bright red oven glove to seductively brush icing sugar over her body. After she drops her knickers in a bold flourish, the camera catches her awkwardly retrieving them. Like many of her contemporaries – including Shana Moulton, Hannah Raisin and Mika Rottenberg – Verhoeven uses irony to enact a strategic distancing from earlier forms of feminist practice while also reiterating their corporeal concerns.

With incredible comic timing, Verhoeven's multi-layered parody of fashion and feminism is intersected with puerile cartoons, such as a dripping penis wearing high heels. One of these animations depicts a woman transformed into a headless sewing machine: kneeling on all fours and strapped into fetish boots, her nipples weave thread into a long phallic sausage. The clip acts as a sarcastic nod to Allen Jones's misogynist sculpture *Table* (1969), concurrently on show at the Royal Academy of Arts, where it provoked the same feminist fury it elicited when first exhibited more than 40 years ago. With my blood still boiling from an earlier visit to Jones's retrospective, I welcomed Verhoeven's underhand punch: if the Royal Academy wants to institutionally celebrate blatant sexism, then let Verhoeven sew Jones's castration anxiety into a cathedral of tampons and toilets. Ironically, Jones's show made all too clear the continued necessity of Verhoeven's fiercely funny feminism.

LAURA CASTAGNINI

DANIEL LIPP

Southard Reid, London

What is a screen? On the one hand, it's a type of partition – an object that separates or hides something. On the other, it is a device that can be used to show rather than conceal (a cinema or TV screen, for example). Daniel Lipp understands this paradox, drawing on it to cultivate a double-life for the screen-like assemblages in 'Slowmo Drama' – his second solo exhibition at Southard Reid – pitching them back and forth between guarded privacy and high theatre.

A Hat is Not a Home (2014) comprises two horizontal trays that jut out from the wall at waist height. In the first tray, a small square of fabric printed with a blue check almost totally obscures a black and white image torn from a book. (It possibly depicts a head, but it's hard to tell.) An enclosing sheet of glass, expressionistically daubed with black printing ink, completes the tray. It's an object full of brio, though one counterpointed by the stark, but no less dramatic, contents of the adjacent tray: a single white canvas partially covering another black and white image (this time clearly featuring the lower-half of a man's head). Here, in a nutshell, is the split-screen of Lipp's work. An ostentatious sculpture that nonetheless remains shy and secretive at its core.

Untitled (2014) is a wall-based box structure composed of three parts: a white powder-coated steel sheath, an inner dibond surface onto which a photocopied image has been transferred and a small piece of couture fabric that dangles loosely from the sculpture's base. While the fabric, with its imprint of interlocking circles and insouciant positioning, is certainly a curio, the real mystery here is the photocopied image. Cropped from a larger crowd shot, it features two black-clad youths reclining amongst a jumble of surrounding limbs, bodies and heads. Something has caught their attention: they look ahead – both handsome studies in penesive physiognomy. As with Richard Prince's early re-photography, the magnetism of this image derives from its lack of submissiveness, the way it fails to fully inform us fully of what is going on. Who are these young men? What are they doing? Inscrutability pervades. This effect is redoubled by the frame of encounter: not a photograph, but a sculpture assembled from disparate parts.

Partially concealed by the manic layering of materials, such as packing foam and raw silk, blotted by large circular incisions, pixelated into a blur or simply refused salient context – the adumbration of the male image is a prominent motif running throughout 'Slowmo Drama'. Whatever it is that the men in this exhibition have to say (for sure it has to do with desire and looking, too), Lipp seems determined to protect it behind a battery of formal devices. This approach is either exhilarating or exhausting; I'm not actually sure. Perhaps it's just truthful, reflecting the way things often are with desire – that is, far from clear.